The Beguilement of Zeus

"What high immortals do in mirth / is life and death on Middle Earth," observed W. H. Auden. He was not necessarily thinking of Homer (nor, for that matter, of Tolkien), but his couplet accurately sums up the interactions of divine personalities in the *Iliad*. In the petty rivalries of the Olympians grave human concerns are burlesqued. Sexuality, of course, emerges as one of those chief concerns.

The tragic events of the *Iliad* are set in motion by Zeus' decision to honor **Achilles**, whom Agamemnon, his king and overlord, had grievously insulted. To show the Greeks that they cannot win without Achilles' help, Zeus allows the Trojan forces to gain the upper hand while Achilles withdraws to his tent, refusing to participate in combat. Hera is a partisan of the Greeks, and her clever seduction of her husband comes very close to thwarting that objective. She schemes with Hypnos, the god of sleep, to render Zeus unconscious after lovemaking. This, in turn, permits her favorites to regain mastery of the field and, in the process, seriously to disable the Trojan champion Hector.

When she approaches Zeus, bathed, perfumed, and dressed to kill, Hera's coy demeanor is reminiscent of those other supernatural seductresses Aphrodite and Pandora. Upon seeing her, Zeus reacts as impulsively as Paris and Anchises. "As soon as he saw her, *eros* shrouded his shrewd heart," the narrator says, "even as when they first joined in love [*emisgesthên philotêti*], going, the two of them, to bed without the knowledge of their parents" (14.294–6). The sexual terminology and grammatical duals will already be familiar from Paris' speech to Helen in *Iliad* 3. Paradigms of human passion are thereby applied to the erotic experience of divinities: a rush of desire overwhelms the mind, more intense than what was felt the first time the partners made love. Zeus' response to this urge is a masterpiece of comic invention, however, for he presses his suit by embarking upon a catalogue of his prior conquests. "Come, let us go to bed and turn to lovemaking," he pleads,

> for never before did desire for goddess or mortal woman
> so overflood and master the heart within my breast,
> not when I fell in love with the wife of Ixion,
> who bore Peirithous, a counselor equivalent to the gods,
> nor when I loved fair-ankled Danaë, Acrisius' daughter,
> who bore Perseus, most renowned of all warriors,
> nor when I loved the daughter of widely-famed Phoenix,
> who bore to me both Minos and godlike Rhadamanthys,
> nor even when I loved Semele or Alcmene in Thebes,
> she who brought forth Heracles, her stouthearted son,
> while the other, Semele, bore Dionysos, a delight to mortals;
> nor when I loved Demeter, the splendid-haired queen,
> nor when I loved glorious Leto, nor whenever I loved you yourself,
> as much as I want you now, and sweet longing seizes me.

The "never before … as now" formula, so flattering on the lips of Paris, has been reduced to sheer absurdity: one can only guess at the thoughts that might have

passed through Hera's mind as Zeus rambles on reminiscing. Furthermore, though he employs the formulaic expression "go to bed" (*eunêthente*), the king of the gods cannot in fact wait until they have returned to their bedchamber, as propriety demands (Zeitlin 1995: 124). Thus all the motifs found in the earlier paradigmatic scene between Helen and Paris are ironically burlesqued.

Whatever Hera's secret feelings, she represses them and pretends to be scandalized. Make love *here*? What a thought! Suppose another god were to happen along and see us? I'd be *mortified*! If that's really what you want, let's go back home (14.329–40). Again, as with Anchises, the love-object's feigned resistance only fans the flames of desire. Zeus, the cloud-gatherer, pledges to surround Hera with a golden mist, so that not even Helios, the sun-god, will be able to perceive them. Then he takes his wife in his arms. Since a bed is required by the formulaic language, the earth sends up a patch of fresh grass for them to lie upon, sprinkled thickly and softly with lotus, crocus, and hyacinth, while the promised dewy golden cloud covers them. So the plan of Hera was accomplished.

In the entire poetic tradition, Hera is the only being, immortal or mortal, who ever triumphs over Zeus even for a moment, and her sneaky victory is retold with appropriate gusto. Humorous as this episode is, however, it has implications for the political stability of the cosmos, for it is of a piece with the recurrent rebellions of Gaia and other female figures in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Zeus' roll-call of past loves reminds us of what the mythological record makes only too clear: "[His] omniscience fails in the face of his desire. Invincible and all-knowing, he is nevertheless baffled by eros" (Holmberg 1995: 110–11). In a universe that comes into existence through spontaneous generation, rather than the creative act of a demiurge, and continues to function on biological principles even under a rational Olympian regime, Hera's seductive wiles pose a challenge to the established order, for they create, if only temporarily, a lapse of direction, a failure of Zeus' will, that might well culminate in a return to primeval chaos. Zeus wakes before any permanent damage is actually done, but the plot of the *Iliad* has come close to being subverted.

Alternatives to Penelope

It is an axiom of scholarship on the *Odyssey* that all its female figures, human and divine, are "foils," or substitute models, for its heroine **Penelope**. Implied contrasts with Clytemnestra, Helen, Calypso, Nausicaa, **Circe**, and Arete delicately illuminate various facets of Penelope's character, such as her chastity, steadfastness, intelligence, and capacity for queenship. Yet **Odysseus**' transactions with other types of the feminine also serve an ideological purpose, for they point up the negative consequences of allowing female sexual desire to range freely without restraint. Odysseus' own objective of resuming his position as king and husband on Ithaca is expressly endorsed by the poem, while female sexuality is depicted throughout as a major impediment to that goal (Holmberg 1995: 108).

The *Odyssey* is, as Wohl neatly puts it, "a charter for the transition from the warrior society of the *Iliad* to the *polis* culture of fifth-century Athens" (1993: 19).